

# CONCEPT

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## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

### Poverty and Youth Transition

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#### Introduction

Recent years have witnessed significant changes in the social and economic context of young people's lives. There is increasing evidence of a greater disparity between those with prospects and those without. For some, these changes represent a time of unlimited opportunity – to travel, to seek personal and spiritual fulfilment or to undertake a whole host of self-developing activities – before settling into adult life. For others however, such opportunities are still as distant as they would have appeared a half century ago. France (2008a) argues that since 1997, 'youth policy's primary focus has been on reducing social exclusion rather than being aimed at poverty' (p498). Policy tends to focus on what it depicts as 'inappropriate' or 'problem' behaviour and in doing so, it ignores the structural issues which can marginalise and impoverish young people's lives.

#### Reconceptualising Youth

The concept of 'youth' attracts many contrasting definitions. Predominantly a social construction, it is understood differently depending on culture and time. Coles (1995) notes that legally, it is often defined in complex and arbitrary ways; for example the age of criminal responsibility begins at 8 in Scotland – so does youth begin then? Or end at 26 when full entitlement to welfare benefits starts? Whereas, Fahmy (2006) suggests that 'rather than pursuing a chronological definition, youth is better viewed as a period of transition, or set of transitions, between the dependency of childhood and the social and economic independence of adulthood' (p349). The idea of youth being a transitory period can be traced back to the work of Olivier Galland (1984, 1991). He posited that in order to negotiate the journey between childhood and adulthood successfully, young people had to make three successful transitions:

- From school to work – The 'professional' transition
- From family home to independent living – the 'residential' transition
- From family of origin to family of destination – the 'domestic' transition



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By navigating their way through these transitions, it is implied that young people will have successfully bridged the gap to full 'citizenship' and adulthood.

However, evidence suggests that these transitions are becoming protracted. In Western societies young people are achieving the traditional markers of adulthood later, sometimes not until their early thirties or beyond. In positive terms, this period of *emerging adulthood* offers young people the freedom and opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of the transitional journey that typifies contemporary consumerist societies – exploring their own identities, changing jobs, partners, living situations or travelling to exotic locations (Arnett 2006). In contrast, for young people growing up in poverty there is far more 'risk' involved in navigating the pathways to adulthood. As Beck (1992) notes, 'risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely: wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom...poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk' (p35). As a result, young working-class people today can find that their journey to adulthood can be fraught with difficulties, many of which can be directly linked to poverty.

Mizen (2002) argues that contemporary politics regarding youth are managed in what he calls a 'monetarist' framework. He contrasts this with a Keynesian framework which was predominant post-war until the mid-1970s. Wyn and Woodman (2006) suggest that 'under monetarist policies, the state has forged a new relationship with the economy, in which economic goals are primary' (p499). This is particularly apparent in Scotland today where the government declares that its overarching aim is 'to create a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth' (Scottish Government, 2008a: 1). The SNP have endeared themselves to those on the left with the introduction of terms such as 'equity', 'solidarity' and 'poverty' back into policy lexicon. However, with the overwhelming focus of the administration centring on ensuring that the country is economically competitive, work is posited as the remedy and the catalyst for all these terms. For marginalised young people, such a focus means that the issues which underpin their exclusion are often ignored.

### Poverty and the 'professional' transition

The resultant policy prioritisation on economic growth has been distinguished by an overwhelming emphasis given to the encouragement – and sometimes enforcement – of



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participation of young people in education, training or employment. Young people have benefited over the past 20 years from the substantial expansion of post-16 education and subsequently progressing from school to university. Those who do not make this transition however, are likely to find themselves marginalised and facing a labour market that has changed markedly over the past three decades. It has been well documented that the radical macro-economic restructuring of the 1970s hit the young working-class disproportionately hard (MacDonald, 1997; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Bottrell and Armstrong, 2007). Up until this point, the vast majority of young people would find secure and stable employment and through this, social independence and a safe transition to adulthood. Now, the transition from school to work for those leaving school has all but vanished leaving young people in this group vulnerable to poverty. The government response to this 'has been towards engaging them in pre- and post-sixteen training and educational courses, thereby increasing their employability' (MacDonald and March, 2005: 85). Arguably, this is a continuation of the move towards 'vocationalism' which featured as a neo-liberal goal for the UK government of the 1980s (Bynner et al 2002; Mizen, 2004). The current Scottish Government (2008b) state that 'encouraging all young people to stay in learning post-16 is the best way of ensuring their long-term employability and contribution to society' (p4). Unfortunately, this policy imperative ignores poverty as the fundamental reason that many young people from poorer backgrounds fail to make this transition in the first place.

Research has consistently shown that young people growing up in poverty are less likely to gain good educational qualifications (Jones, 2002; Bynner, 2005; Hirsch, 2007). Those young people in Scotland who qualify for free school meals are half as likely to get to level 5 in the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (Scottish Executive, 2006a). Several studies have also uncovered that the level of 'cultural capital' at home is deeply significant – parents' social class, their level of education, experience of unemployment and their housing situation all affect the educational and employment destinations of their children. (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Dolton *et al.*, 1999; Stafford *et al.*, 1999). To date, the Scottish government's approach has failed to tackle these issues effectively. Rather than focusing on the root cause of the disadvantage that these young people suffer - their poverty - policy merely appears to address the symptoms.



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Education alone is not enough to break this cycle. Young people from impoverished backgrounds can find that a period of unemployment upon leaving school can have what Parekh et al (2010) call a scarring effect on future prospects, therefore carrying their childhood disadvantage well into their adult lives. Although the current policy can be seen as a continuity of the vocationalist trend started by the Conservatives in the 1980s, what has changed is the nature of much of the training and education programs. Rather than learning new skills which might offer young people the most minimal of footholds in today's increasingly competitive labour market, educational and training courses offered to today's youth emphasise the work ethic, deference and a containment of deviance. The result is a greater polarisation between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' with a substantial number of young people, primarily from poorer backgrounds, falling behind those young people who go on to further and higher education.

### Poverty and the 'residential' transition

For young Scots with ambition to leave their family home, the options can appear very bleak. Lacovou and Assave (2007) established 'there is a strong relationship between independent living and youth poverty' (p47). Following devolution, there has been a policy divergence in Scotland a nation which arguably now 'has some of the most progressive homelessness legislation in Europe' (Ormston, 2008, p2). For example, the *Homelessness (Scotland) Act 2003* extended the range of groups to be considered as having priority need and therefore eligible for permanent accommodation. However, social housing remains in short supply. Consequently, homeless young people can spend months in temporary accommodation, hostels and bed and breakfasts 'which are often unsuitable for children and the accommodation can be of poor quality and even dangerous' (Giullari and Shaw, 2005: 413). With the recent economic downturn it is likely that the residential transition will continue to impoverish some young people.

### Poverty and the 'domestic' transition

Furthermore, for those young people leaving school with little in the way of qualifications, many are accelerating their transition to parenthood often without a stable relationship for support. As Cote and Bynner (2008) note, 'for young women, NEET frequently converts into early pregnancy and parenthood, with exceptionally high incidence in the UK and USA'



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(p255). For young parents compounded problems related to poverty tend to manifest in three ways. The first is escaping the poverty that they are likely to come from. The second is that benefit rates for young people are lower than that of adults and this can place young parents at extreme risk of poverty, particularly single mothers under age 16 (Aasave et al, 2006). The third is that for those parents that do find work, the level of wage is unlikely to ensure an escape from poverty; again a situation heightened for lone mothers (Levitas et al, 2006). Policy discourse in this aspect of the journey to adulthood has changed little over the last twenty years, with work consistently championed as the best route out of poverty for young parents (Scottish Government, 2009). Also, little heed has been paid to the fact that the work available to young people tends to be part-time, poorly paid and with little in the way of prospects. Again, offering no guarantee of escaping the trappings of poverty. Allied to this is the continuation of the moralistic discourse which has surrounded teenage parents since the early 1990s. Teenage parenthood is still acknowledged as a principle cause of social exclusion often constructed as a social problem, one particularly attributed to the poor working-class.

### Blame

An obvious continuity in the rhetoric of policy is a discourse that points to the failings of young people themselves in relation to perceived negative transitional destinations. As Davies (1986) noted some 25 years ago, the governments philosophy towards working-class youth was that they 'were characterised as, by their very nature, lacking in appropriate skills, qualities, habits and attitudes' (p54). This analysis has persisted with policy continuing to centre on the deficiencies of young people, evidenced in a whole raft of contemporary policy documents (Scottish Executive, 2006b; Scottish Government, 2007a; 2007b; 2008a). For example, the Scottish government states that its framework for addressing poverty includes:

Addressing educational disadvantage and underachievement; tackling poor health; providing more choices and more chances for vulnerable young people at risk of disengagement; tackling worklessness – particularly deep-rooted pockets of inter-generational worklessness (Scottish Government, 2008a: 9)



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This focus on ‘problem’ groups masks the underlying structures which serve to marginalise those young people actually living in poverty. Mizen (2004) argues that by putting in place a vocational work preparation course for all young people, the responsibility for unemployment can be shifted squarely onto the shoulders of the ‘feckless’ youth. Unemployment is highest among young people, particularly those most marginalised and with the recognised least credentials. As a result some young people struggle to make the transition to adulthood and get caught in a cycle of training schemes and poorly paid temporary jobs. And ‘when the individual is unable to immediately move into new work, failure may be very differently experienced, as internalised deficiency, uncertainty and sense of *disconnection*’ (Bottrell and Armstrong, 2007: 357 – my emphasis). With young unemployed people, teenage parents and homeless youth increasingly disenfranchised from the processes of production and consumption, this disconnection can only serve to deepen their poverty leading to a sense of social dislocation and isolation.

### Questioning Transition

The process of transition is under the spotlight. The fragmentation and growing *individualisation* (Beck, 1992) of our society mean that the traditional markers of adulthood have become less relevant (Jeffs and Smith, 2001; Mizen, 2002; 2004, Arnett, 2006). Wyn and Woodman (2006) argue that due to this fragmentation of the youth phase, the transition model has become inadequate. Instead, they offer a ‘generational’ approach in attempting to understand the nuances which define the youth phase as it exists today. By looking at the social, political and economic milieu which characterise each generation, they argue that we may be better placed to understand the differences which separate young people today, say, from their parents. Wyn and Woodman argue that a generational perspective allows us to locate processes of social change such as individualisation as relevant to young people growing up today. In contrast, the transition model presupposes that there is a ‘normative’ process which all young people should be expected to make. As such, they suggest that it is impossible to draw comparisons with previous generations in terms of meeting markers such as the school to work transition – like their parents did due to the changing (and changed) world in which they live; ‘the point is that they cannot, they are doomed to ‘failed transitions’, because the circumstances that enabled and shaped the Baby Boomer generation are no longer in existence’ (p511).



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What still exists, however, is that factors such as race, gender and class still play a critical role in determining how structures of inequality are generated. Many people would agree that contemporary politics places more responsibility and obligation on the shoulders of society's young citizens; they are increasingly 'accepting responsibility for their actions and making independent decisions' (Cote and Bynner, 2008: 261). As such, they are constructing their own narratives resulting in a linear interpretation of the transition model being questioned. However, the sense of 'agency' that a young person has can still be positioned within their social circumstances. It is difficult to imagine the amount of power a young, single mother living in an area of significant deprivation will have to determine her own pathway to perceived adulthood. For young people living on the margins the individualised outlook cultivated by our modern politics can only serve to heighten the disconnection they may feel from failing to meet the markers of adulthood. What makes this particularly pernicious is that the individualised nature of our modern society means that many impoverished young people growing up in late modernity may suffer from what Furlong & Cartmel (2007) describe as an 'epistemological fallacy':

Blind to the existence of powerful chains of inter-dependency, young people frequently attempt to resolve collective problems through individual action and hold themselves responsible for their inevitable failure. (p144)

As a result, for young people who fail to make the linear transitions deemed 'normal' in policy terms, they can locate the deficiency in themselves, when in actual fact the problems reside in the radically altered society in which we now live.

### Conclusions

The nature of youth transitions has changed markedly over the past thirty years. Inequalities have persisted and arguably worsened, social class origins continue to be hugely influential in shaping young people's life chances. Subsequent governments through a dominant monetarist agenda and focus on social inclusion appear to have sought to tackle the symptoms of poverty not the causes. For the majority of young people growing up today in Scotland, the transition to adulthood has been postponed primarily due to a protracted



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‘professional’ transition; in other words gaining employment is still the primary destination and key marker of independent adulthood. For young people growing up in poverty however, these transitions can be accelerated. In response to the threat posed to the model of youth transition by the growth of individualism it is probably fair to say that ‘young people do exercise agency, to varying degrees and under diverse circumstances, but this agency is subject to...their material position and relations in society’ (Wyn and White, 1997: 142). Even those young people with a high degree of personal agency may find the road to adulthood difficult should they struggle to find the stable and secure employment which underpins all three transitions. As has been shown, policy tends to focus on the individual failings of young people instead of the structural issues which serve to marginalise them in the first place. With the number of unemployed young people in the UK rising above the one million mark (BBC, 2012) recognition of this would be most welcome.

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